

# Engineers clear UXO littered land

## Iron Rakkasans make northern region safer for Coalition, Iraqi people

Story and photo by Pfc. Chris Jones  
40th Public Affairs Detachment

**BADUSH REGION** – With each step the soldiers took, their fawn-colored boots bore deeper into spongy, wet mud. They trekked slowly up a steep hill,

eyes to the ground six feet ahead. All around them were dozens of pieces of unexploded ordnance. One soldier sidestepped a mortar round.

The soldier, Maj. Collin Fortier, operations officer, 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne

Division (Air Assault) knows the dangers that face his “Iron Rakkasans” during their mission in the Badush region of northern Iraq. The hills in this region are littered with unexploded ordnance.

Two platoons of the Iron Rakkasans, as well as a team of engineers with the 326th Engineer Battalion, are set to clear this dangerous land by destroying the almost 10,000 UXOs lying recklessly in the remnants of former regime ammunition posts.

Infantrymen from 5th Platoon, Company D, and 2nd Platoon, Company B, were recently tasked with identifying thousands of UXOs across the mountainous Badush region, while engineers of 3rd Platoon, Company C with the 326th have been toiling to blockade entry in and out of the treacherous area.

According to Fortier, the project dates back to 1991, during the Gulf War, when intelligence reports confirmed large weapons caches in the Badush region of Northern Iraq. The U.S. Air Force bombed the sites, but no ground forces were sent in to clean up the mess.

Twelve years later, the Iron Rakkasans are doing just that.

The soldiers from the different units left their bunks in Tallafar last week and merged together in a large wooden building at the heart of the Badush region nestled at the summit of a rocky crag east of Mosul, northern Iraq’s largest city. Despite how stark the three days of constant rain made the site, and regardless of how menacing the UXOs were for the troops, as infantryman Spc. Christian Hanna put it, “we’ve seen worse.”

Hanna, like many other infantrymen with Company B, plays dual roles – at night, he’s an observation post guard searching for shepherders and other travelers; and during the day he identifies UXOs with a contracted team of demolition experts.

Hanna’s role as a sentry tower guard has been made easier, he said, by the moon’s illumination of nearly the entire region. On a post at a hilltop, he said he can see all movements up to more than 500 meters away.

“Since I’ve been here, the moon has been real bright,” he said. “I see a lot of animals walking around at night. We have a problem with wolves out here, too.”

While guard duty has been Hanna’s primary responsibility, he said the few times he has spent with the demolition team have gone smoothly.

“We’ve stayed safe so far, but I wouldn’t go banging a hammer around,” Hanna said.

Once the infantrymen locate and identify the UXOs, the demolition experts collect the explosives and transport them to a remote blasting site in the moun-

tains and detonates them.

While the infantrymen search and identify and the demo experts destroy the UXOs, the engineers of the 326th Engineer Battalion have spent the last week creating barricades – soil mounds for vehicles and a barbed wire fence for those on foot – to keep Iraqi citizens from potential tragedy, as well as to keep insurgents or terrorists from using the stockpile of UXOs as arsenal against Coalition forces. This is what Fortier said may be responsible for a number of attacks against U.S. troops in northern Iraq.

The Badush region of northern Iraq was previously under the control of the 101st Airborne Division’s 502nd Infantry Regiment, but when attacks in Mosul began to escalate in November, the unit’s focus turned back to the city, leaving the Iron Rakkasans with one of their final tests before returning home.

Capt. Edward Caracillo, Company B commander, said an underlining goal in the project is to ensure fluidity in the handover to Iraqi security forces in the region. The battalion spent much of the fall season training and equipping Iraqi civil defense organizations such as the Iraqi Security Force and the Iraqi Civil Defense Corps. It’s now up to the Iron Rakkasans to hand control over in such a way that the Iraqi forces will continue the progress already made in spite of the reduction or absence of U.S. forces.

“We’re trying to transfer control back to the Iraqis, but it’s our obligation to make sure that when we leave, [Iraqi forces] will know what to do and how to do it,” Caracillo said. “We need to establish a system to turn things back over to the people of the country.”

Fortier, Caracillo, and Sgt. 1st Class Richard Clinton, platoon sergeant for 2nd Platoon, Company B, spent Tuesday driving around the sharp, gritty mountains of Badush. Looking out, they saw progress in motion, as Iraqi and U.S. forces worked together at guard posts and in the field, setting barbed wire barricades. The December rain was unrelenting.

“We’re like mailmen,” Fortier said of his Iron Rakkasans, “neither rain, sleet nor snow will stop us.”



Soldiers of 3rd Battalion, 187th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division stretch concertina wire over a barbed wire blockade to keep innocents protected from fields where thousands of unexploded ordnance dangerously lie.



# GIs thankful for Operation Gratitude

**By story and photo  
Sgt. Christopher Stanis,  
1st Armored Division  
Public Affairs**

**BAGHDAD** – This holiday season, Santa isn't the only one making a list and checking it twice.

Thousands of 1st Armored Division Soldiers in Iraq and service members throughout the

U.S. military who are deployed overseas will be remembered this holiday season because of Carolyn Blashek and Operation Gratitude.

Operation Gratitude is a program that has been providing support to troops since the build-up for Operation Iraqi Freedom, from one woman's living room.

The Encino, Calif. native started Operation Gratitude after she

was unable to enlistment in the Army Reserves following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"Following Sept. 11, I tried to join the Reserves, but was politely, though firmly, told I was way too old," Blashek said.

But with the war on terror raging, the now-48-year-old knew there was something she could do to support the troops and the nation.

"I looked for ways as a civilian to support the military," Blashek said, "and eventually found the (United Services Organization) at (Los Angeles International Airport.) I volunteered there one, then two days a week."

While working one night at the USO, Blashek received a visit from a soldier who was in dire need of talking to a chaplain, or anyone available.

Since Blashek was the only one working at the time, she listened to his concerns.

"He said he was (home on emergency leave) to bury his mother, his wife had left him years ago and his only son had died as an infant," Blashek said. "He said, 'I am going back

(overseas) and I don't think I will return this time, but I don't think anyone would care.' That was when I realized the need for service members facing war-time danger to know that someone back home cares about them."

So began Operation Gratitude, an independent, non-profit organization, originally funded solely by Blashek.

She sent her first four packages in March to a primarily female unit that she learned had run out of hard-to-get supplies.

Soon after word of the operation got out, family, friends and community members began contributing to the funds – approximately \$15 to \$30 per package.

Through October, Blashek shipped 650 packages.

In early November, a "Support the Troops" holiday drive kicked off.

The magnitude of the event blossomed.

More than 200 volunteers have assembled about 3,500 packages.

The operation was moved to the Army National Guard's 746th Quarter Master Battalion

Armory in Van Nuys, Calif.

To date, the holiday drive has mailed more than 4,000 packages.

When it wraps up, Blashek plans on continuing to mail at least 100 packages a week until every soldier on her ever-growing list receives a box.

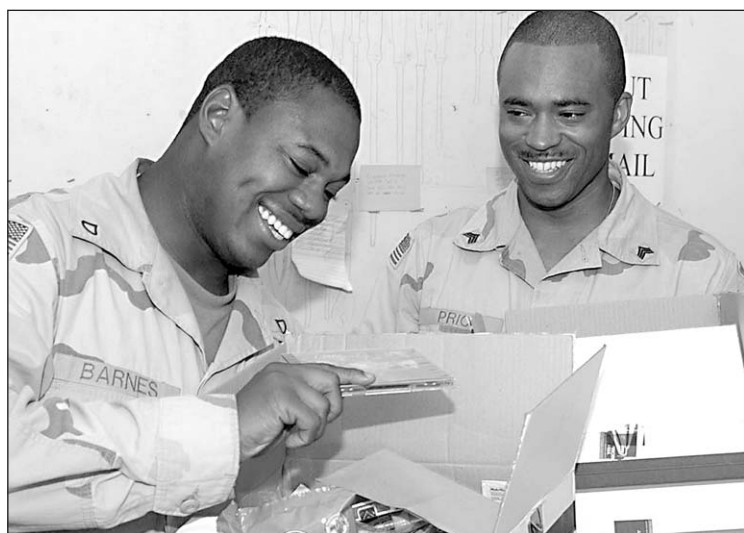
Originally, Blashek gathered names of soldiers by word of mouth, asking friends, family and everyone she met if they knew new troops serving overseas.

In 1AD's case, contact with Brig. Gen. Mark Hertling, assistant division commander for support, provided names to Blashek.

Now her Website, [operationgratitude.com](http://operationgratitude.com), allows family members and soldiers to sign up names on their own.

Blashek foresees Operation Gratitude as a permanent means for civilians to show their support.

"My intention is that Operation Gratitude will continue for as long as the United States Military has any service person deployed anywhere in the world," she said.



**Soldiers of 1st Armored Division open care packages sent to them from Carolyn Blashek and Operation Gratitude. Blashek, a civilian, has sent thousands of care packages.**

## Bomb blasts exam buffers force protection

## Computer models provide insight that may save lives

**Story and photo by Grant Sattler  
CPA-USACE-IPC PA**

A blast effects expert with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers provided planning 'tools' to aid anti-terrorism and force protection personnel in understanding and reducing the effects of a variety of insurgent and terrorist weapons and tactics.

Ed Conrath, a professional engineer with the Corps' Protective Design Center in Omaha, Neb., has been providing blast effects assessments for units in Iraq since August.

"But I'm just one guy," he said. "With this training, the tools will be available to more of our troops."

Since the USACE PDC stood up in 1983, Conrath has been working with engineering testing and the design of protective measures and ensuring they are reflected in construction standards. The Center helps in the development of force protection measures for permanent and expeditionary facilities.

Attendees for the first session of training in Baghdad included combat engineers, AT/FP specialists, and military police planners. Conrath said successful AT/FP requires integration of security and engineering concepts.

"Protective systems combine manpower and procedures, and equipment and construction," he said. "It takes all four legs to stand."

Marshall Young from the Combined Joint Task Force-7 AT/FP Office said they will use any tool they can to protect the lives of soldiers. He said the training will be beneficial in assessing bases in Iraq.

"To be able to look at the engineering side is very important for us. Instead of just putting best practices down, we can model the new and emerging threats," Young said. Additionally, the software allows modeling of specific structures and can be modified for the different building standards and materials used in Iraq.

Lessons covered evaluating the effectiveness of various measures against stationary or moving bombs, using computer modeling to evaluate blast effects.

The computer modeling programs help engineers determine the effectiveness of perimeter ballast walls.

Conrath advised the group on the best way to conduct assessments.

"When you go out you need to think about each of the threats one at a time and walk it through," he said. "What may not mitigate one threat, may be effective against another, so don't discount it



**Ed Conrath, a professional engineer with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Protective Design Center, talks about the affects of explosions on a variety of construction materials during a recent short course on blast assessments in Baghdad.**

immediately."

Capt. Mill Anderson, intelligence and security officer of the 1457th Engineer Battalion, Utah Army National Guard, attended the class to learn about the software and the process used to improve force protection around Baghdad.

"When we receive a mission, given time to use this software, I think we'll be better able to plan what type of improvements we give the forward operating bases, the Iraqi police stations, and the entry control points to give them better survivability," he said.

Soldiers of 1st Armored Division open and enjoy care packages



# Small unit makes monumental difference

**Photo and story by Sgt. Mark Bell**  
372nd Mobile Public  
Affairs Detachment

**BAGHDAD** — He's opened the canals that supply water to farmers across southern Baghdad, provided a medical clinic to an isolated community, and gave new schoolbooks to Iraqi children. More importantly, he is giving his soldiers the chance to make a difference for the Iraqi people.

Col. John Huntley, Albany, N.Y., 414th Civil Affairs Battalion commander, a 21-year Army veteran and the New York state veterinarian, said being a soldier in Iraq is the best place to make a difference in the world today.

"We are working in a way to help the Iraqi people here, and at the same time working for the best interest of Iraqi people and coalition forces," he said.

Although Huntley commands the small unit of 17 soldiers from Utica, N.Y., his soldiers are making a big difference. The civil affairs teams around Iraq, although small, is where the war on terrorism will be won.

Huntley said the civil affairs soldiers are the interface between civil and military operations. Civil affairs teams are reconstructing Iraq by helping the government to rebuild itself.

"In the aftermath, what we are working on is civil administration," he said. "Everything you associate with the normal function of a municipal government we are trying to restore and build in Iraq."

The key, Huntley said, is to teach Iraqis to do for themselves.

"That's how coalition forces are going to exit Iraq when they can go and take over themselves."

Huntley said working with the neighborhood, district and city level administration is the key element that will allow the Iraqi people to move to a better Iraq.

"They need to have the ability to build those structures," he said. "That will carry them into the future with a new Iraq that will interact with the international community."

The coalition's biggest gift to the Iraqi people, he said, is education.

"It gives you a fresh perspective on life," he said about educating the Iraqi people. "It's one of the few things that keeps you engaged on a daily basis and as you get older you keep learning to keep from getting stale. Everyday is an adventure. You are always learning something new."

With school projects filling his calendar, Huntley said seeing the end result of a lot of hard work is the ultimate gift given to him and his soldiers.

"You can see it in the children's faces," he said. "They truly appreciate the restoration we have done. The teachers are happy with the upgrade to facilities."

Restoring schools is a good way to demonstrate to Iraqi people that coalition forces are trying to improve the quality of life for the average Iraqi, Huntley said.

Still, the changes in Iraq won't happen overnight, he said.

"The American people need to realize we are not here for the short term," he said. "Right now, especially in the environment we are in, we need to worry about our long-term goals."

He said he thinks the stability of the operation is the future of Iraq.

"This is where the long-term success will be made," he said pointing to his list of upcoming projects. "What our team is doing is demonstrating the successes that will generate popular support and our enemies are after the same popular support, and I think we are taking that ground away from them."

Although he is a high-ranking officer, Huntley said his success as a battalion commander stems from his soldiers.



**Col. John Huntley, 414th Civil Affairs Battalion commander, an Army Reserve unit from Utica, N.Y., and Sheik Saad Abid Kadahiu rotate the floodgate handle releasing water into the agriculture communities southwest of Baghdad recently.**

"I couldn't do it without my soldiers," he said.

Huntley said he couldn't be more proud of his youngest and brightest soldiers.

"Everyone really has stepped up to the plate and done a great deal to make these projects successful," he said.

More importantly, Huntley said his soldiers are proud of the work they have done.

Together, Huntley and his small band of

soldiers who work nonstop behind the scenes and without the high-profile media coverage are making a difference — one small project at a time.

"I have something to return home to be really happy about," he said. "The whole experience has taught me that I really have enjoyed working with the Iraqi people. They genuinely want what is best for their children," he said.

## Chaplains offer guidance, sanctuary to troops

**By Staff Sgt. Rodrick Stallings**  
350th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment

**AL FALLUJAH** — Behind the scenes, military chaplains are tending to and strengthening troops by providing spiritual boosts.

Maj. Scott Carson, 3rd Brigade chaplain, says he has a calling to minister to soldiers.

Chaplains perform a unique function for soldiers in Iraq.

Ministering to soldiers in combat also includes combat stress classes, suicide prevention and reunion briefings.

Interacting with soldiers and providing reassurance is part of the everyday life for the chaplains of 3rd BCT.

Chaplain Carson stated his calling is first to be doing God's will here and to minister to soldiers.

"I believe in what the Coalition is doing with the mission [freeing Iraq] and establishing democracy for the Iraqi people," said Carson.

The chaplains have orchestrated three separate services to meet the needs of the majority of the soldiers of St. Mere Eglise, the forward operating base here.

Chaplains offer Protestant, Catholic and Mormons services. These worship services provide a sanctuary for soldiers.

With bullets flying, IEDs detonating and rockets launching on a daily basis, soldiers need to know there is comfort and stress relief in the chapel.

Carson's fellow chaplains deliver religious services and inspired messages to the troops at St. Mere chapel in Al Fallujah. In the midst of potential attacks, chaplains at the base have turned this hot spot into a haven for ministering to American soldiers.

Many opt for the traditional Sunday service. The Protestant service is at 10 a.m. and has all the flair of any state-side church. It boasts its Praise Singers whose leader, Capt. Todd Hollins, just happens to be one of St. Mere's chaplains.

Hollins, under the guidance of Carson, has put together a praise and worship group which leads the congregation during the service.

The group is accompanied by an acoustic-guitarist, Spc. Elliott Diaz. His amazing hand-speed is enjoyed by the congregation. Strumming the strings of his guitar at

an almost frantic pace, he aides in the worship process. Diaz is a self-taught guitarist and he freely shares his musical gift by playing in church.

As he plays, soldiers react to his performance, and many voice their approval of his ability to spiritually uplift them. Worshippers around the chapel lifted their hands during the service to show their appreciation.

Another goal of the St. Mere chaplains is to remove the soldiers' minds from the thought of the hardships they face on a daily basis.

Carson said it's his calling and his duty to bring soldiers to God and God to the soldiers.

"The job is challenging because we endure the same hardships soldiers endure, including being shot at," Carson explained.

Though their job is challenging, and at times, dangerous, chaplains continue to serve soldiers in their time of need.

Whether it is taking their minds off the harsh Iraqi conditions during a Sunday morning service or comforting them after a firefight, Army chaplains are available to help.



# SmackDown in Baghdad a hit with GIs



Above: **Wrestler Chris flies over the top rope during his match with Eddie Guerro.** (Photo by Spc. Rodney Remson, 319th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Right: **The Big Show chokes John Cena during a match. Cena won the non-title match.** ( Photo by Spc. Rodney Remson, 319th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

Below: **Vince McMahon introduces himself and his wrestlers to troops .** (Photo by Spc. Nicole Thompson, 319th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment)

